(De)Facing the Wall. The Traditions, Transactions and Transgressions of Street Art

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> *The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry*.[1]
>
> *No dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention*.[2]

On 15 February 2009 the *Sunday Times* published an article with the headline: 'JR: The Hippest Street Artist since Banksy'.[3] The piece referred to the twenty-eight year-old French street artist known as JR, a former *taggeur*-turned-*photograffeur* (a linguistic blend of 'photographe' and 'taggeur'), and reported on the sale of his *photograf* depicting a young man brandishing a video camera as though it were a piece of heavy artillery (Figure 1). The previous year, a giant, one hundred-foot high version of this image entitled 'Ladj Braquage' had been pasted onto the façade of the Tate Modern, forming part of the gallery's 'Street Art' exhibition that showed the work of artists whose now-blossoming careers had also begun in the streets.[4] Confirming

1. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 126.
2. Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', in *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 31–49 (p. 43).
3. Ed Caesar, 'JR: The Hippest Street Artist since Banksy', Sunday Times, 15 February 2009 <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/arts/Visual_Arts/article150043.ece> [accessed 17 March 2010].
4. The other street artists featured in the Tate show were BLU (Italy), Sixeart (Spain), Os Gemeos and Nunca from São Paolo and the American collective Faile. The exhibition 'Street Art' ran from 23 May to 25 August 2008.

the entry of this evolved strain of graffiti into the inner sanctum of the conventional art world, the newspaper article and many others in a similar vein blurred the border between graffiti's associations with discourses of vandalism and deviance and its status as a 'hip' or 'cool' form of contemporary art.[5] The worlds of gallery and ghetto collide.

Figure 1 — JR, 'Ladj Braquage' (London, 2008). Photograph courtesy of Bill McIntyre.

Exploring the shifting ground of the relationship between street art and transgression, this article analyses the dislocation of street art from its traditional geographies of deviance, and investigates the possibilities for understanding this art form as a socially engaged spatial practice in the era of advanced commodity culture. With the recent explosion of street art onto the contemporary art market, conservative notions

5. See, for instance, Alice Fischer, 'How the Tate got Streetwise', *Observer*, 11 May 2008, p. 26; Béatrice de Rochebouet, 'Le Phénomène JR', *Le Figaro*, 28 November 2011, p. 22; Philippe Dagan, 'De la marginalité au musée: Itinéraire d'un art sauvage, crypté et savant', *Le Monde*, 10 July 2009, p. 18.

of graffiti as visible sign of disorder, testament to social dysfunction and imminent violence, have dissipated; labelling graffiti as vandalism becomes increasingly difficult once certain examples of its offspring in the form of street art have been sanctified at Sotheby's and the Tate. The alternative, liberal discourse on graffiti persists, however, and this is a mode that locates in graffiti (and, more lately, in street art) the voice of 'underground' social dissent. From a liberal perspective, therefore, street art performs as a viable transgression of established norms and socio-political codes for behaviour and communication in the city. We must ask, however, whether the recent entry of this 'art on the streets' to the gallery's 'white cube' fundamentally undermines this latter association of street art with social activism, and question how, subsequent to its commodification, we might assess the relationship of this most public of arts to the French public sphere.[6]

In order to situate conceptually the correlation between socio-political transgression and street art, the opening section of the article brings together theoretical readings of space and culture, before moving to trace more specific historical discourses of graffiti and transgression through the Surrealists' and Situationists' connection of art, everyday life and politics. Such an approach allows us to unpack the association of street art with urban activism, and leads to the question of how this generalized identification with socio-political transgression is rendered problematic in the aftermath of the art form's incorporation to the market and museum. Rather than approach the question from a position of general debate as to the function of the work of art in the era of high capitalism, the concluding section of the article moves to a localized analysis of the work of the aforementioned artist JR, and his extended project *28 millimètres*. In so doing, it suggests a need to move beyond an account of graffiti as a 'pure form' of deviance, or of street art as an inherently transgressive procedure. At the same time I wish to eschew a straightforward reading of street art as pure spectacle. Such a reading repeats what Jacques Rancière has termed 'le discours

6. Joe Austin, 'More to See than a Canvas in a White Cube: For an Art in the Streets', *City*, 14.1–2 (2010), 33–47.

mélancolique' of New Left critique, and asserts that in the postmodern world of advanced capitalism, all forms of artistic critique or protest are necessarily complicit in the consistent rejuvenation of neo-liberal bourgeois individualism.[7] Instead, and tentatively, the final sections of this article turn to examine the specific locations of the work and explore the ways in which this art might intimate the emergent voice of otherness in a postcolonial and transnational Paris.

Mapping the Territory: Street Art and Urban Culture

Beginning with the conservative equation of street art and vandalism allows us to unpack some of the meaningful tensions from which transgression emerges, and to understand further the socio-political implications of street art for the urban context. The conservative identification of graffiti as vandalism arises from the seemingly simple fact of graffiti's presence in an arena where it is otherwise not supposed to be. Transgression, in this sense, is understood at its most basic to imply an overstepping of legal boundaries and a confrontation with the site of urban order, an order which refuses that which is extraneous to its normative arrangements for legal, institutional and politically sanctioned space. Or to put this in another way, graffiti operates in discourse as a transgressive spatial practice insofar as it is predicated upon a contrast with the discourse of urban space as an orderly totality, a whole that is legally and institutionally framed. These discursive frameworks are embodied in the architectures of the city — in the walls of its monuments, buildings and streets — so that normative social relations are embedded through the presence of a coherent architectural and visual order delimiting urban life.[8] For urban

7. Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), p. 40.
8. For an account of the western dialectic between architecture and society from sociological and geographical perspectives see Edward Soya, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Alexander R. Cuthbert, *The Form of Cities: Political Economy and Urban Design* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006) and Michel Lussault, *L'Homme spatial* (Paris: Seuil, 2007).

theorists and sociologists, this architectural delimitation implies more than a simple mapping of the physical possibilities of space. Since the advent of the western industrial city in the mid-nineteenth century, the dialogue surrounding modernist architecture and urban planning has seen in architectural form the reproduction of a value system predicated upon control, the rationalization of behaviour, and the legitimization of normative social codes that assist in ensuring the persistence of a dominant social narrative most readily epitomized by the term 'bourgeois space'.[9] These strategic operations of spatial configuration reveal their limits, however, through the micro-operations of the city's inhabitants which for urban sociologists Henri Lefebvre, Jane Jacobs and Michel de Certeau perform as tactics that subvert and, potentially, transgress the normative codes of the city's cultural landscape.[10]

In order for transgression to occur, then, one precondition could be the idea of a border as the *limit* of the dominant conceptual order and, therefore, also, a beyond: the possibility of what the geographer Edward Soja calls a 'Thirdspace' — a mode of understanding space through the trialectic relation of 'spatiality-historicality-sociality' and which engenders a critical spatiality bringing (a correspondingly trialectic) alterity into play.[11] Transgression understood in this way is more than a simple subversion of aesthetic procedures, and does not refer to an internally focussed critique of form alone, but implies a movement across dominant normative limits into a critical contextual arena. To put this in another way, we can conceive of the difference between subversion and

9. Some key works that have informed this author's understanding are Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1974); Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 2006) and Tim Cresswell, *In Place/ Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
10. See Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace*; Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1961) and Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1990–1994).
11. Soya, *Thirdspace*, p. 57.

transgression as reflecting two contrasting ideas of culture. On the one hand, subversion, understood as an overturning or inversion of order, is predicated on a deterministic view of culture, a one-way linear cultural model of cause and effect. In mutual relationship with this 'top-down' cultural narrative, subversion functions as its reverse pole, confirming the necessity of order even as it threatens to overturn the objects of constraint at work within the system of social forces. In line with this classical Marxist thinking, the operations of subversion remain premised on a linear understanding of the relations of power. On the other hand, to follow Michel Foucault's and Raymond Williams's understanding of culture as a complex interrelation of restrictions and pressures — where social regulation is the result of the 'whole social process itself' and not of 'an abstracted mode of production' — it becomes possible to conceive of street art as a particular form of social practice which is at once the product of, and point of resistance to, the dominant elements.[12] Following Williams's conception of culture as an intricate nexus of interrelating intensities allows for a more complex understanding of transgression. In this schema, transgression is more than an alternative activity existing discretely outside the limits of dominant culture; it is also the process of an 'emergent cultural practice' that moves beyond a 'phase of practical incorporation'.[13] This is to say that transgression, understood as emergent procedure, and, in contrast to simple inversion, inaugurates a degree of oppositional movement within the system and resists a return to stasis.

Relating this wider cultural forum to a more specific strand of thinking about social relations in the urban context, we can connect the idea of cultural emergence as transgression to Lefebvre's correlation of social existence with spatial existence. Social relations project themselves into space, and in so doing become active in 'producing space', or in ascribing meaning to space. Seeking to move beyond

12. Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Williams, 'Base and Superstructure', pp. 31–49.
13. Raymond Williams, 'Dominant, Residual and Emergent', in *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (London: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 1001–05 (p. 1002).

traditional philosophical divisions of form and content, or theory and praxis, Lefebvre argues that pure 'form', conceived in separation from the pragmatic, can only emerge when viewed from a distance, from the abstracted terrain of analysis.[14] But for Lefebvre, whose concern is to develop a theoretical model inseparable from the practice and production of the urban space that it describes, and from which it emerges, the idea of 'form' as transparency and distance requires reframing in terms of a relation with substance conceived as opaque and proximate. A dialectical theory, in other words, which Lefebvre elucidates as follows:

> Pour la raison dialectique, les contenus débordent la forme et la forme donne accès aux contenus. La forme mène ainsi une 'existence' double. Elle est et n'est pas. Elle n'a de réalité que dans les contenus, et cependant elle s'en dégage. Elle a une existence mentale et une existence sociale.[15]

Transferring this idea to our context, a spatial practice such as street art operates as a form that contains both an ideal existence ('une existence mentale') and a social existence. These theoretical categories are most clearly concretized through thinking about the interactive presences that lend meaning to the art form. Firstly, through its presence in the city, street art inaugurates the dual inscription of the body; it inscribes the body of the viewer in space through the work's perception, while it implicates the body of the artist whose presence can be conceived through the manifestation of the image. More than this, however, the dialectical operation of perception/conception is, in Lefebvre's model, mutually reconfigured by a third process — the space as 'lived experience' — which is to say that the micro-territories of space, as a progressive, unending series of interrelating forces, are essential to the singularity of the work's existence. Meaning emerges through the interplay of all three levels, therefore, through the transference between what is perceived, conceived and lived, as aesthetic form

14. Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la ville* (Paris: Economica, 2009), p. 83.
15. Lefebvre, *Le Droit*, p. 83.

enters into correspondence with the contextual mobilities of the city. When we consider street art in the light of Lefebvre's triple dialectics, the equation of its form with transgression is inseparable from the contextual or situated frame in which it operates, and this dialectic is the basis for particular forms of social relation. Understanding street art in its urban context, therefore, imbricates art in the fabric of the city's spatial orders, which give meaning to social space. In this sense, if street art is transgressive then it is not simply a question of flouting aesthetic boundaries but also one of recognizing an oppositional cultural and social practice.

Of Primitivism and Protest

In the French context, the association between graffiti, art and socio-political opposition can be located within the discursive tradition of the artistic avant-garde, and more particularly in the respective projects of the Surrealists and the Situationists. While art historians commonly trace the origins of contemporary street art to the appearance of aerosol art and the emergence of hip-hop culture in New York in the 1970s, the discursive invocation of graffiti as art, and more than this, as the origin of art, is already explicit in the writings of amateur photographer and one-time Surrealist Georges Brassaï. In the early 1930s, Brassaï began to photograph graffiti found carved into walls around Paris and published a collection of the images along with a critical essay, 'Du mur des cavernes au mur des usines', in the review *Minotaure*.[16] Brassaï's images showed graffiti that consisted of hand-carved grooves pared into the wall to resemble faces, animals or hearts, and which commonly originated in a pre-existing crack or fault line in the wall's structure. For the amateur photographer these carvings represented a 'naïve' impulse towards the creative act, an inherent human urge equivalent to children's drawings and thus associated

16. Georges Brassaï, 'Du mur des cavernes au mur des usines', *Minotaure*, 3.4 (1933), 6–7.

with the instinct to scribble. Brassaï's appropriation embedded these graffiti in the pseudo-ethnological, 'primitivist' discourse of the early twentieth-century avant-garde. For Brassaï, graffiti evokes

> des analogies vivantes établissant des rapprochements vertigineux à travers les âges par simple élimination du facteur temps. À la lumière de l'ethnographie l'antiquité devient prime jeunesse, l'âge de la pierre un état d'esprit, et c'est la compréhension de l'enfance qui apporte aux éclats de silex, l'éclat de la vie.[17]

The singularity of graffiti's precarious existence and unknown origin is positioned as a precultural source. Brassaï's description here contains echoes of Georges Bataille's essay 'L'Art primitif' wherein Bataille identifies scribbling as the first stage in the transformative process of 'altération'. For Bataille it is from the instinctual scribble that there emerges a new visual resemblance; the spontaneous scribble is transformed into a new object that in its turn undergoes further alteration.[18] Beginning with an unconscious, primitive gesture, this crossing of boundaries from one form to another (the 'trans' as act) signals for Bataille the inherent destruction involved in the act of creation; in Bataille's conceptual matrix one form supersedes another with the effect that, if creation is libidinal, then it is also violent and sadistic.

Brassaï's 'softer' primitivism situates graffiti less in terms of a violent gesture than as a sign of an original human desire to make a mark, to inscribe the trace of one's existence on the urban landscape. Placed in contrast to learned art, graffiti's style and significance originate with its material; it is the wall that solicits the form which, consequently, is of a harsher, denser quality than the artful line demanded by the paper surface of the sketchbook. The wall gives access to struggle, 'it slows the hand, it focuses concentration and requires effort, liberating the life-giving

17. Brassaï, 'Du mur des cavernes', p. 6.
18. Georges Bataille, 'L'Art primitif', in *Œuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), I, 247–54.

force that wells up from a child's inmost being', and in accordance with this intensive dialectic between the material world and the individual impulse, the wall becomes instrumental in engendering the shape of human expression.[19] That these graffiti were to be found in the heart of the metropolis evidenced a primordial urge to scratch into and indelibly mark the smoothness of the city's ordered surface, confirming the presence of an authentic underbelly to modernity's bright façade. In addition, such discourse stamps graffiti as art, for art here is understood to be an instinctual interaction with the environment, a primeval sign that returns one to the source. In response to the mechanical age, the Surrealist vision posits an artistic nature that, ideally, cannot be consciously considered or rationally learned. Through recourse to an original archaism, graffiti is implicated in the Surrealist concern to avert the crisis of reproduction in the mechanical age, because of the way that its corporeal interactions testify that authentic art cannot stem from a mechanized or monopolized process.[20] Thus, graffiti — as found object — is understood as 'primitivist' art form, and is taken as evidence for 'the unformed and untamed realm of the prerational and the unconscious'.[21] Its naivety central to the Surrealist vision for the reconciliation of the external and internal worlds, and must be unearthed from beneath academic and institutional protocols. It is this promotion of the irrational threading through Surrealist aesthetics that becomes central to the Situationists' anti-rationalist project of urban intervention; a form of practice that gave graffiti a more active role in opposing the dominant forces of post-war French culture.

As for the Surrealists, the city's spatial orders were the site for the development of the Situationist International's politico-cultural agenda. However, for the Situationists the internal, auto-directed procedures that had characterized Surrealism were flawed and deficient in their scission

19. Georges Brassaï, *Graffiti* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), p. 42.
20. 'Le Procès des graffiti', in Brassaï, *Graffiti*, pp. 143–50. In its 'primitivism', graffiti is akin to Jean Dubuffet's conception of outsider art — art as an act beyond the purview of the rational mind and, by implication, beyond the institutional logic of either the art world or its market.
21. Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 58.

of art from the praxis of everyday life. Rather than seek transcendence through an appeal to ancient aesthetic impulse, the Situationist concern was with the new, rationalist architectures of modernist, post-war reconstruction. In the spirit of Surrealist *errance*, the Situationists sought a new arrangement of movement to challenge the rationalism, mechanization and exclusion that urban planning represented, and which they identified most closely with Le Corbusier's 'radiant city'.[22] The expression of the movement's politics differed significantly from Breton's concern to unite the artistic revolution with a party-organized agenda, and instead emphasized play and spontaneity, moving artistic activism further away from any attachment to institutionalized politics. In the era of the new town and mass consumption, when French culture was negotiating the twin forces of post-Fordism and a dwindling credence in Stalinist Communism, the Situationists retained a vehement anti-bourgeois edge, but instead of party manifestos their critique was (initially at least) heavily influenced by currents in the dissident architectural theory of Constant Nieuwenhuys, and in mutual, intellectual exchange with the urban sociology of Lefebvre.[23] From these focal points, the Situationists developed a radicalism that was concretely located in the manifestations of everyday life: the rational city of work and order must become the city of play and adventure, the new arrangement of movement must be derangement. Whereas, in James Clifford's seminal definition, 'ethnographic Surrealism' relied on a notional other as the destination of its artistic expedition (an exoteric reference point), we can say that the urban adventure of Situationist ethnography lay not beyond contemporary western life, but precisely within its cracks and fissures.[24]

22. One particular diatribe against the architect reads: 'Le protestant modulor, le Corbusier-Sing-Sing, le barbouilleur de croûtes néo-cubistes fait fonctionner la "machine à habiter" pour la plus grande gloire du Dieu qui a fait à son image les charognes et les corbusiers'. International Lettriste, 'Les Gratte-ciel par la racine', *Potlatch 1954/1957*, ed. by Guy Debord (Paris: Éditions Allia, 1996), pp. 21–22 (p. 21).
23. See Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 158–74.
24. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 117–51.

The Situationist appropriation of graffiti was thus pragmatic and behaviour-oriented, a critically engaged process of art as socio-political deviance, which formed an essential part of the movement's urban play tactics. Slogans such as 'Construisez vous-mêmes une petite situation sans avenir' were pasted on the walls of Paris 'dans les lieux psychogéographiquement favorables', and 'night scribblers' were encouraged to visit the office of their free newspaper *Potlatch* to collect pre-prepared banners for tactical fly-posting on the walls of the city.[25] These nocturnal tactics sought to resist critical tautology through the fusion of art and everyday practice, emphasizing the city as a free, public and ludic space. Furthermore, the newspaper's title, *Potlatch*, was not merely anecdotal, but signalled the foundation for the Situationists' understanding of urban intervention in line with critical thinking on traditions of the Amerindian gift economy as a ritual of pure expenditure.[26] For writers such as Marcel Mauss and Bataille, unlike the exchange principles of the western market economy, potlatch was a transgressive act of exchange due to its elimination of the expectation of return; the gift is given freely and to the point of excess, 'jusqu'à épuisement total'.[27] As part of this critical, gift-giving intervention in the urban environment, graffiti constituted a part of the wider principles at stake in the play tactics of the urban *dérive*; the Situationist practice of aimless walks and emotionally synchronized cartographies that sought to 'détourner' the institutional architectures and instrumentalist divisions of work and leisure ordering experience of the city. The praxis of the *dérive* was underpinned by a conception of the street as theatre, and on this basis everyday life was transformed into a performance that, through emphasis on spontaneous wandering over destination, would

25. Mohamed Dahou, 'Rédaction de nuit', *Potlatch*, p. 86.
26. As observed by German-American ethnologist Franz Boas and theorized by Marcel Mauss and Bataille. See Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques', *L'Année sociologique*, 1 (1923–1924), 30–186. Georges Bataille, 'Le Don de rivalité: Le "Potlatch"', *Œuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), VII, 66–79.
27. Daniel Lindenberg, 'Debord et les Marxistes', *Magazine littéraire*, 399 (2001), 31–33 (p. 31).

restore flexibility and extemporaneity to the impoverished street. As part of the actions undertaken during these *dérives*, graffiti functioned for the Situationists as a form of behaviour; a peculiarly esoteric intervention in the dominant orders of the bourgeois city that equated dissidence with social revolution and cultural awakening, and which reached their pinnacle in the civil unrest of students and workers in May '68.

From One Wall to Another

While the events of the May revolt may have been short-lived, the association of graffiti with a protest politics of the street remains one of the major discursive threads shaping meaning in contemporary street art. Until recently, the deviant contexts in which it appears have been at the heart of street art's primary semiotic of dissident social protest. The deviance is two-fold: street art posits a counter-aesthetic, performing outside the gallery space — thus outside the discursive space of conventional art history —, and also exists outside the limits of the law, appropriating public space for use as private expression. Contemporary street artists such as the British artist Banksy and French artists ZEVS and Invader import discourses of urban activism into their work, through emphasis on street art's formal and contextual disruption of the dominant spatio-visual order of the city, namely that of advertising. Against conservative detractors who see street art as an aberrant infraction of the places of normatively constituted social categories, Banksy elucidates a definition of street art as transgression, but with the understanding that the violations of street art perform a type of social responsibility, potentially operating as an alternative tactics of resistance. As Banksy puts it:

> The people who truly deface our neighborhoods are the companies that scrawl giant slogans across buildings and buses

> trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff. They expect to be able to shout their message in your face from every available surface but you're never allowed to answer back. Well, they started the fight and the wall is the weapon of choice to hit them back.[28]

In this discursive reversal, the strategic spatial orders of the advertising industries emerge as perversions of public welfare which, in their appropriation of urban space for corporate interest, succeed in the proliferation of the public's psychological alienation.

Figure 2 — Banksy, 'No Stopping' (London, 2012). Image courtesy of Banksy.

Banksy's statement is a comment on the privatization of urban public space and its colonization by the market, and also speaks to the wider shape of the public sphere as an increasingly constricted arena,

28. Bansky, *Wall and Piece* (London: Random House, 2005), p. 8.

where possibilities for 'answering back' are progressively lost. In this narrative, it is advertising that emerges as a deviant body, and its sanctioned locations — the walls, buildings, billboards and bridges of the city — become the surfaces onto which street art encroaches in order to displace advertising's operations of exposure and its will to object identification (Figure 2). These actions are distinctly reminiscent of Guy Debord's identification of the dominant mode of bourgeois life as being that of the 'spectacle', wherein the visual orders of sign exchange pathologically infiltrate the viewer's critical ability to respond.[29] In the 'society of the spectacle', the human being is transformed from citizen to consumer. Like the art of the Situationists, therefore, contemporary street art, through its disruption of the expected orders of the urban environment, participates in an attack on consumerist passivity.

For street artists, deviant practice is central to their art's meaningful construction as a tactical 'taking back' of the street from corporate visual logic.[30] For ZEVS (pronounced 'Zeus'), the identification of street art with iconoclasm is the defining characteristic of his 'attack' on brand marketing. ZEVS's style is based on principles of 'visual kidnapping' and 'liquidation'. In the first tactic, images of models from billboard campaigns are clandestinely cut out from the poster, leaving behind an empty silhouette, while a message is then sprayed on the advertisement demanding a ransom for the return of the model.[31] Liquidation, on the other hand, involves a visual assault on the logos of global brands such as Chanel, McDonalds and, most recently, the entire 'Google' homepage, re-appropriated on the artist's website.[32] Attacking the symbolic integrity of the logo, the signs' edges are sprayed with

29. Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).
30. Due to the fact that most public space is privately owned, the mode of operation of much street art is stealth. The artists remain anonymous unless or until they are apprehended by the police, and almost universally employ tag names as pseudonyms to protect their identity. The American artist Shepard Fairey is a notable exception. Fairey is perhaps best known for his 'Obama Hope' poster from the 2008 presidential campaign.
31. Bastian Schwarz, 'Mord am Model', *Berliner Zeitung*, 5 May 2002, p. 11.
32. The artist's website is accessible at the following link <http://www.gzzglz.com> [accessed 14 February 2012].

paint, with the effect that they begin to drip, making the logos appear to be in a process of meltdown. Snatched from their iconic family of proliferating and identical siblings, the referent of these dripping signs is thus reoriented to point to the presence of the artist, leaving a trace of deviant re-appropriation in a kind of evolved version of the iconic underground tagline, 'I woz ere'. The works of street artists such as Invader, Miss.Tic and ZEVS perform and gather meaning, then, as visual invasions of the spaces of urban advertising, and as interventions in the mythologies of 'common-sense', commodity-driven aesthetics of high-capitalist urban culture (Figure 3). Using various aesthetic and linguistic devices, which are heavily reliant on irony and playful deviance for their meaning, accusations of vandalism are redirected at the private interests dominating the visual order of the city. A politics of social protest through play is thus one of the primary modes of enacting an artistic value-system defined by its antithetical stance to consumerism.

Figure 3 — ZEVS, 'Liquidated ipod' (Paris, 2008). Image courtesy of ZEVS.

Similarly, there is a refusal of the gallery space in the interest of rendering art more accessible to the public. This refusal forms part

of the democratizing rhetoric of these artists, as encapsulated by the web profile of Parisian artist Miss.Tic, which states that she is 'offrant ses œuvres au public, les rendant plus accessibles, refusant l'Art qui s'enferme dans les musées'.[33] This statement resonates with the revolutionary discourses of Surrealism and Situationism for the way that it posits an art liberated from institutional shackles, an art that locates its value in popular access and participation as against what it contrastively positions as the elitism and hierarchies of the conventional art world. In its discursive opposition of the exclusive enclosures of the museum to its own democratic appropriation of the city as exhibition space, this practice positions art as a key tactic in retrieving the public sphere from institutional governmentality. And, in the end, this is an ironically hopeful and even utopian discourse, one that envisions the relations of consumer exchange as vulnerable to critical intervention by an art whose deviant geographies and ironic aesthetics self-consciously refuse the logic of the market and the passivity of Debord's spectacle. This discourse places street art as the reverse violation of the urban *habitus* perpetrated by private and institutional interests, and in doing so seeks to suggest the possibility of a narrative of identity, posited on democratic deviance, in opposition to the branded identities offered by corporate lifestyle executives.

The Culture Industries[34]

It is the extraordinary ability of advanced capitalism, however, to absorb its own critique and to appropriate oppositional discourse

33. Galerie W, 'Miss.Tic' <http://www.galeriew.com/artistes/miss-tic.html> [accessed 13 May 2011] (para. 4 of 6).

34. The term is adapted from Adorno and Horkheimer's well-known thesis that, with the advent of monopoly capital, the instrumental imagination of science and administration had become a homogenizing power governing systemically all forms of representation and action. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 120–67. It has been adapted here to respond to the limitations of the critique with regards to its romanticized vision of 'high' culture, as well as its theoretical assumption (inherent in their use of the singular 'industry') that the field of consumption is

for its own ends.[35] Therefore, while the contemporary themes of street art are notable for their coherency in attacking commodity culture, the question that haunts this art's oppositional postures is its recent acceptance and marketing by the very establishments it seeks to eschew. In 2007 the reputable London auction house Bonhams boasted their first commercial sale of street art prints, and pronounced themselves to be 'the market leader in this rapidly growing section', reporting 'world-record prices' in selling 'the work of some of the biggest names in the field'.[36] Likewise, established galleries clamoured to represent artists, while new exhibition spaces dedicated solely to what has been now rebranded 'urban art' have sprung up in Paris, New York and London.[37] Meanwhile, many artists have organized conventional gallery shows where invited guests include Hollywood celebrities and heavyweight collectors of the contemporary art world.[38]

monolithic and unified: 'In the culture industry […] imitation finally becomes absolute. Having ceased to be anything but style, it reveals the latter's secret: obedience to social hierarchy. Today aesthetic barbarity completes what has threatened the creations of the spirit since they were gathered together as culture and neutralized. To speak of culture was always contrary to culture. Culture as a common denominator already contains in embryo that schematization and process of cataloguing and classification which bring culture within the sphere of administration. And it is precisely the industrialized, the consequent, subsumption which entirely accords with this notion of culture' (p. 131). Despite the historical specificity of Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the culture industry as an englobing mode of standardization symptomatic of mass industrial society, the term remains useful for the way in which it encapsulates high capitalism's prolific tendency to incorporate and to commodify cultural artefacts, and to translate cultural value in accordance with the logic of the dominant ideology and of the liberal market economy.

35. See the chapter, 'Alt.Everything: The Youth Market and the Marketing of Cool', in Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2000), pp. 63–86.
36. Bonhams Auction House, 'Urban Art' <http://www.bonhams.com/departments/PIC-URB/> [accessed 10 January 2011] (para. 1 of 1).
37. The following galleries exhibit and sell some of the most prominent French names in the field, including ZEVS, Invader, Miss Tic, JR and the 'father' of stencil art, Blek le Rat: Gallery Magda Danysz (Paris and Shanghai), Galerie le Feuvre (Paris) and Raison d'Art (Lille). Meanwhile the Victoria & Albert Museum in London presents street art as a logical addition to its tradition of collecting 'new forms of printmaking.' V&A, 'Street Art' <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/street-art/> [accessed 10 July 2011] (para. 5 of 5).
38. Edward Wyatt, 'In the Land of Beautiful People, an Artist without a Face', *New York Times*, 16 September 2006, section Art & Design <http://www.nytimes.

As street art moves inside the white cube, so the narratives connoting meaning for the works are modified. In her article for *Art Magazine*, the critic Marie Zawiswa locates the paradox of street art's institutional incorporation in relation to its Situationist ancestors: 'L'art dissident pénètre ainsi les musées et les plus grandes manifestations d'art contemporain. Signe de la mort de l'art subversif né avec Mai 68? Ou bien de sa victoire?'[39] It is not, however, as simple as saying that the entry of this dissident art to the museum signals the acceptance of alterity by the establishment. While the liberalization of public space means that, increasingly, the mainstream becomes the only stream, the way in which these works are presented and marketed threatens to reduce the complexity of their contextual resonances, losing sight of the specific localities from which they emerge. Avoiding its association with the politics of protest that heavily mark the French association with graffiti, international auction houses and galleries tend to frame the work either in terms of the aesthetic development of graffiti (the aerosol anecdote), or in terms of its affinities to modern painting. However, as Joe Austin points out, such narratives reduce 'what is historically unique about this aesthetic form', namely the political resonance that stems from its location in the street.[40] At the same time, the marketing and sale of the work by auction houses and private dealers tends to short-circuit radically the artists' tactics for targeting commodity culture and institutional hegemonies.[41] Not only are we no longer in a transgressive terrain of critical action through urban practice, selling a dripping Chanel logo for $15,000 would seem to render null and void any pretence to the mildest subversion.[42] We might say, therefore, that while the ideal *form* of transgression is resolutely maintained, the

com/2006/09/16/arts/design/16bank.html?_r=1> [accessed 11 July 2011].

39. Marie Zawisza, 'Que reste-t-il de mai 68?', *Art Magazine*, 24 May 2008, 46–58 (p. 49).
40. Joe Austin, 'More to See than a Canvas in a White Cube', p. 34.
41. To date the most expensive piece of work has been Banksy's 'Space Girl and Bird', sold for £288,000 by Bonhams Auction House, 25 April 2007.
42. Lot 93, 'Liquidated Chanel' sold by Philips de Pury & Company, 23 September 2011, New York <http://www.phillipsdepury.com/detail/ZEVS/NY000411/93/1/1/12/search.aspx?search=ZEVS|rpp=12|p=1> [accessed 13 January 2012].

shifting context of *where* street art performs threatens to undermine its expressive value as social resistance.

Inside the gallery, the semiotic resonance of the museum wall enters into play, and this encompasses much more than the logic of display. Through its structural arrangement the gallery wall provides a topographic order that effectively intervenes in and neutralizes the work's substantive relation to its social context.[43] In addition, the assumed names of the artists are incorporated very effectively by the corporate world so that, transferred from the street, these pseudonyms work as ready-made branding mechanisms through which to market the works. While in 1969 Foucault could declare that 'Un texte anonyme que l'on lit dans la rue aura un rédacteur, il n'aura pas un auteur', with their entry into the market these works are now ironically bestowed with an 'author-function', and thereby implicated in the categorical ideologies of the dominant culture which they seek to question.[44] Once under the hammer, it is arguable that this is no longer a 'lived art' that targets passivity as, once converted to commodity, the tendency is for the object to be perceived and conceived in relation to the exchange value of the artist's name in market terms.

The evidence of these market tendencies is seen in the way that street art has literally been removed (rather than effaced) from walls across the global cities of London, Paris and Los Angeles and placed in the auction houses and galleries of these same cities where it is marketed as deviant, hip, cool.[45] In light of the rampant vogue for street art amongst wealthy collectors, the question that shadows the discourse of contemporary street art is whether or not the commodity is, inevitably, the universal structuring principle.[46] In the global cities where these

43. See Sonja Neef, 'Killing Kool: The Graffiti Museum', *Art History*, 30.3 (2007), 418–31 (p. 426).
44. Michel Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?', *Littoral*, 9 (1983), 3–38 (p. 12).
45. Andrew Pulver, 'Banksy Targets LA ahead of Oscars', *Guardian*, 17 February 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/feb/17/banksy-la-oscars?intcmp=239> [accessed 19 February 2011].
46. Georg Lukàcs, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Andy Blunden (London: Merlin Press, 1967).

street artists operate, the tendency of high capitalism towards the breakdown of distinctions between high and low culture has the effect that oppositional difference becomes so profligate as to become banal. In accordance with the logic of the liberal market's non-discriminatory colonization of culture, any active opposition is effectively neutralized through its appropriation and repackaging, smoothed out so as to be marketed as gentle sign of customized difference.[47] In its absorption by the market, is street art's pretention to enact a social relation of dissent reduced to the status of a relation between things, a commodity within the network of exchange? Does the market for deviance mean an end to socially engaged transgression?

Re-placing the Street in Street Art

As we have seen, if street art's transgression is derived from its engaging the discursive resonances of the street as forum for oppositional practice, then, by this logic, its commodification quite simply signals the end of its transgressive potential. But this idea of transgression, informed as it is by an ideological simplification of consumerism as an externally imposed condition, fails to take into account the myriad ways in which citizens proliferate, change and engender power structures through their everyday practices. More importantly, this emphasis on the dominant strategies of culture tends to decontextualize the work both historically and geographically. Macrostructural categories are perhaps ineffective when it comes to considering works so heavily reliant on context for their meaning, tending to furnish the critic with simple paradigms for judging the success or failure of the work, forcing it often into a partisan sphere that commands art to perform as a totalizing gesture. In this concluding section, I propose that while much contemporary street art is indeed commissioned, photographed and hung in museums, in its

47. For an understanding of contemporary commodification processes, I have found the following useful: Klein, *No Logo*; Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (London: Yale University Press, 2006) and Jim McGuigan, *Culture and the Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 1996).

localized contexts it functions as a means of engendering alternative practices of urban space and of introducing emergent narratives of otherness that are empowering to the subjects who participate in the processes of creating and viewing such art. If these images resonate in relationship with the specificity of the historical and geographical moment, then perhaps we should consider the question of transgression in relation to the works' local contexts.

To turn to JR, this artist began his career as a *taggeur*, but due to his lack of talent — as he explains it — he turned instead to taking photographs of other graffiti artists' tags in order to document and preserve them. Following this, the artist began to direct his camera at his friends from the *banlieue*, giving rise to his first illegal 'exhibition' on the walls of Les Bosquets, a council estate in Montfermeil in the eastern suburbs of Paris. All of JR's work employs the medium of photography and, in particular, the genre of portraiture. The images are shot in black and white, printed using large-scale presses and then fly-posted onto walls. Thus, unlike more traditional street art practices of spraying or stencilling, the aesthetic properties of this artist's work distort the discursive categories of photography's contextual and formal traditions. This use of the photograph subverts the primary social relation that has been the purview of the photographic form since in its invention, namely its social operation as archive (whether personal or official) and socio-historical document.[48] Situating the image in the city subjects the photograph to adverse weather, street sweepers, not to mention other graffiti artists who may appropriate its canvas. In the street, therefore, the photograph is dislocated from its established discursive position as a document whose dominant function is preservation and which, as the product of a practice by which visual information is encoded, stored and retrieved, is thus intimately inscribed in modern and contemporary processes of memory.[49]

However, it is not simply in the intermedial intensities of form that JR deterritorializes the traditional grounds for graffiti's transgressive

48. See Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography's Discursive Spaces', in *Visual Culture: A Reader,* ed. by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1999), pp. 193–209.
49. Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), p. 126.

action. Beyond the discursive implications of this stylistic hybrid, it is through its site-specificity as well as its participatory procedures that the work of art engenders a substantive relationship with the dual spaces of its production and exhibition. The artist employs Banksy's weapon of choice, the wall, but substantiates Banksy's subversive language of critique and stealth through the deployment of art as sustained project and action. To return to our initial image, 'Ladj Braquage' (Figure 1), it is certain that the Tate may have brought the image to the attention of the art world, but its mechanisms for doing so failed to recognize the significance of the initial contexts in which this image first appeared. The man in the photograph is a young documentary filmmaker Ladj Ly, a founder member of the Kourtrajamé film collective based in Paris. The story of how this image came about relates back to 2004 and to the first stage of the illegal exhibition *Portrait d'une génération*, where the artist took photographs of locals living in Les Bosquets. The images were fly-posted on the end walls of blocks of flats and remained there for over a year, until one November evening they appeared on the news in the background of the televised images documenting the eruption of the 2005 riots.[50] Home to a large working-class and immigrant population, labelled as 'zones sensibles' by the French government, the French mainstream media's coverage of the *banlieues* remains controversial for its tendency to circumscribe these areas in an imagery of exotic violence, simplifying the inhabitants' identities along the lines of an issue-based politics of left and right.[51] In response to the riots, JR moved to the area in 2006 and along with Ladj Ly initiated a project with the young men and women of Les Bosquets. In this second phase of *Portrait d'une génération*, the artist asked locals to pose inches away from the camera and to pull exaggerated, threatening faces to mimic

50. Katel Pouliquen, 'Déclic urbain', *L'Express,* 17 November 2005, Magazine section, p. 7.
51. For an analysis of the political appropriations of the banlieues see Philippe Bernard, 'Banlieues: la provocation coloniale', *Le Monde,* 19 November 2005 <http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/ARCHIVES/archives.cgi?ID=1e308500c9b210cdcd1dbd5bb771ad8fbb1eb68025290ca2> [accessed 10 May 2011].

what JR describes as their mainstream portrayal as 'des extraterrestres'.[52] In stark contrast to the wide-angled and long-distance images of much of the media coverage of the riots the previous year, these photographs were shot in extreme close-up, the full-frame lens bringing into almost uncomfortable proximity the grotesquely distorted faces of the subjects. These 'photografs' are transgressive on a number of interrelated levels. Firstly, they deny the distantiation imposed by the French media's creation of a discursive borderline between the deep-rooted social problems of the *banlieue* and the privileged sites of central Paris. In their geographical migration across the *périphérique*, the operations of this contextual art become relational as well as oppositional, as the *banlieue* intervenes in the flow of the urban centre. Furthermore, not only do the subjects participate in the creation of their image, but in their exaggerated expressions they play with the notion that an image can ever capture the 'reality' of their subjecthood. They thus redeploy the visual code to 'answer back' and call into question the dominant words of 'cet extérieur hostile', from the largely unlived idealism of words such as 'égalité' from the French national motto, to the imposture of labels like 'racaille'.[53] The ironic violence of the video camera as weapon playfully implies that these inhabitants will 'shoot back' with their own visually coded messages that speak to the singularity of each of the subjects portrayed.

By negotiating the shape of the action with the communities themselves, the art takes on local resonances and functions that fall outside either the aesthetic or socio-political codes of graffiti. All four exhibitions of the on-going *28 millimètres* project, *Portrait d'une génération* (2004, 2006), *Face 2 Face* (2005–2007), *Les Sillons de la ville* (2008)

52. JR in an interview on 'Le Journal de 13 heures', France 2, 6 August 2007 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLz1t86-igc> [accessed 10 May 2011].

53. See Didier Lapeyronnie, 'La Banlieue comme théâtre colonial, ou la fracture coloniale dans les quartiers', in *La Fracture coloniale*, ed. by Pascal Blanchard and others (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), pp. 213–22 (p. 219). 'Racaille' was the word used by the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy to describe the inhabitants of the banlieues. See the reportage, 'Le Journal de 20 heures' on France 2, 11 November 2005 <http://www.ina.fr/video/2964936001/20-heures-le-journal-emission-du-11-novembre-2005.fr.html> [accessed 10 May 2011].

and *Women are Heroes* (2008–2009) were undertaken in participation with communities around the globe as well as in collaboration with humanitarian organisations such as Médecins sans Frontières.[54] Very often, these communities are poverty- and war-stricken, and ethnically and religiously divided, as in the controversial case of the *Face 2 Face* project carried out on the Peace Wall dividing the Gaza Strip and Israel, which involved pasting portraits of Palestinians and Israelis side by side. Such ephemeral art further serves as a platform for more enduring social relations, as with the project *Women are Heroes*, where the artist established a community centre in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, using the profits from sales of the work. In the case of the project *Women* in Kiberia, before pasting the photographs of local women the artist first had to acquire approval from the male community who questioned the usefulness of the action, or its capacity to alter the realities of their lives. While the artist explained that these images were intended to highlight the plight of Kiberian women, in conversation with the men it became apparent that the aesthetic statement would have to be renegotiated. In response, the artist instead used the laminated photographs to fix the roofs of the shantytown.[55] No longer visible from the street, here street art transgresses the boundaries of form to become materially functional, with the effect that the site specificity of the work operates on multiple planes, moving discursively, too, from its abstract beginnings as political and cultural mapping of inequality towards the exigencies of everyday life.[56] A mundane territory, perhaps, and one inscribed in the broader realities of globalization and in western consumerism's geo-political loss of sight as to the localized effects of its liberal ethos, but a territory which is also crucially altered through the creative encounter (Figure 4). At this micro-level of site-specific action, street art enters the world in such a way as potentially to empower subsequent appropriations of

54. JR, *28 Millimètres: A Journey through JR's 28mm Projects* (London: Lazarides Gallery, 2008).
55. For a full description of the project, including personal narratives by each of the women photographed, see, JR, *28 Millimètres: Women are Heroes* (Paris: Éditions Alternatives, 2009), pp. 82–144.
56. T.J. Demos, 'Rethinking Site-Specificity', *Art Journal*, 62.2 (2003), 98–100 (p. 98).

the image, which in the case of this artist is significant as all profit is returned to fund the next community-based project. Such a 'moving towards' returns us to art as potlatch, as gift, an action through which form extends to the micro-territories of an unforeseen socio-cultural relation.

Figure 4 — JR, 'Street Kid', *28 Millimètres Women* (London, 2008). Photograph courtesy of Nick Webb.

Reflecting on the work's potential ways of working on the viewer when transferred from the site of its making to the site of exposure in a global city such as Paris, it is here that the institutional appropriation of street art becomes problematic. Read in the context of this appropriation, it could be said that JR's project risks slippage into an interpretive mode which spectacularizes poverty, participating in the

very systems of inequality which the project wishes to resist. Interpreted in this way, the project's involvement with the institution threatens to neutralize its radical potential to call into question western hegemonies of representation. Institutionalized street art risks compounding these hegemonies for the way in which the institution's regulated forms of display tend to direct the interpretation of the image towards the aestheticized domain of spectacle. In connection with the museum space, regulated representation allows the viewer to acknowledge the reality of the poverty depicted, but, to paraphrase Debord, this passive identification potentially replaces genuine engagement.[57] This superficial contact potentially reinforces systems of inequality through the commodification of poverty as fetish — the reviled object, once aestheticized, circulates as confirmation of the unbridgeable separation between the viewer and the viewed. In this theorization, characterized by Rancière as 'la mélancolie de gauche', the display or rendering spectacular of otherness simply participates in the exploitation of the visual regimes of domination that underpin high capitalism.[58]

As Rancière demonstrates, however, such disenchanted critique, while telling us that we are victims of the illusion of the spectacle — wherein all real social relations are the product of representation and its consumption — remains irrefutable and ties critical thought in a tautological knot of impotence. Once it has told us that any critical interpretation of, or protest against, the system is in the end an element of the system itself, this melancholic mode of reading fails to conceive of any possible emancipation from the system.[59] Against this melancholic discourse, Rancière argues that aesthetic protest can create 'dissensus'; a mode of critique based on assumptions which refute the idea that people are ineluctably incapacitated by '[le] secret caché de la machine qui les tienne enfermés dans leur position'.[60] In contrast to such ideas 'dissensus' assumes that 'les incapables sont capables', that

57. Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (1967), p. 14.
58. Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 39.
59. Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 37.
60. Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 55.

there is no 'bête monstrueuse absorbant tous désirs et énergies dans son estomac', and that 'toute situation est susceptible d'être fendue en son intérieur, reconfigurée sous un autre régime de perception et de signification'.[61] It is this understanding of 'dissensus' that restores to transgression its critical possibility; transgression conceived as the opening out of possibility from within the seeming inevitability of the system of appearances as configured by the culture industries.

I would suggest finally then, that through its participatory qualities as well as its aesthetic interventions in the symbolic field of Parisian urban social space, JR's work undermines certain of the received ways of seeing the inhabitants of the *banlieue*. Through its repositioning of the gaze from that of the dominant spectator to that of the ironic subject, it is perhaps most forcefully through the ludic distortion of the codes of the face in western urban culture that JR's work might be seen to perform transgression as a kind of emergent otherness. Further, there is an unavoidable confrontation with the face of the subject that refuses distillation through a critical language that would refuse the possibility of any potential subject-hood being set into motion through participation and that relies on an impotent condemnation of the work's participation in the regimes of seeing already in existence. While the size and dramatic portraiture of these faces have a familiarity to the western urban dweller accustomed to advertising's fashion models or cinema's star close-ups, and to the coded territory of the urban visual order, these faces are composed of twisted mouths and widened eyes, expressing staged surprise, sorrow and a kind of ironic monstrosity.

Fragmented to conform to the texture of a monument, eyes are sliced from the face so as to glare or gaze from a bridge, impressing an alternative monumentality onto the skin of the city, layering their subjectivity over the cluttered landscape of the established signs of urban advertising. Imparting subjectivity, these eyes function as counter-faces, for the ways that they suggest reciprocal avenues of subjective intention and semiotic assemblages of meaningful looks. Distorting the

61. Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 55.

Figure 5 — JR, *28 millimètres: Portrait d'une génération* (London, 2008). Photograph courtesy of Phil Rogers

macrostructural codes of poverty, ethnic division and powerlessness, the other-as-victim so cherished by the media, this art's practice is not defined by its essential attributes, by its aesthetic modalities or objecthood, but by its specific contextual weave of a previously unseen subjectivity into the motion and simultaneity of the city. In the context of postcolonial Paris, street art resonates with the historical territories of boundary, separation and distance to inscribe the emergence of a potentially new social relation, an answering back that opens out the possibility of relational cultural practice, inviting the viewer to move beyond the limits of that territory, to face the wall so as better to break it down.

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